

How much snow is enough on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge?

by Robin West

With spring coming, many Kenai Peninsula residents are starting to think about fishing, canoeing, and hiking. As the area snowpack lingers, however, a few die-hards are trying to get in that last x-c skiing adventure or snowmobile trip.

In an article in last Friday's Peninsula Clarion, the Refuge announced closure for snowmobile use on April 21. While many people have already put their machines away for the season, a few have inquired as to why the Refuge would close now when we still have so much snow. I thought I would try and explain why this was done.

Refuge regulations allow for snowmobile use on portions of the Refuge between December 1 and April 30, if snow conditions are adequate to protect underlying vegetation. Public announcements are made each year to open and close the Refuge between these time periods.

While some restrictions on snowmobile use, including announced opening and closing dates, have been in place since snowmobiles were first used on the former Kenai National Moose Range, we have only been keeping exact records of these dates for the past 23 years. The maximum number of days (151) that the Refuge could be open has only occurred once (winter of 1994-1995). Two winters (1980-1981 and 1985-1986) the Refuge was not opened at all.

The average number of open days over the last 23 years has been 103 days; this year the Refuge was open to snowmobile use for 138 days.

The decision to open or close to snowmobile use affects the whole Refuge and sometimes there is adequate snow cover at higher elevations but not in the lowlands. Likewise, this time of year, while lots of snow may still be available up high, riding on frozen streams, and some lakes, becomes increasingly hazardous.

While our decisions are primarily based on protection of wildlife and habitat, we always do the best we can to consider human safety factors as well.

Snowmobile use is kind of a "love-hate" activity it seems. Many folks believe that the use is gener-

ally harmless to wildlife and habitat, and argue vehemently that no restrictions are needed on the activity. Others can't understand why snowmobiles are allowed at all on a National Wildlife Refuge, especially in the Wilderness Areas. We hear from both groups of course, and to be honest, our regulations are a compromise to some extent, and generally folks who feel strongly about any particular issue are never completely happy with a compromise.

From my standpoint the compromise is working. Some large areas are off limits to snowmobile use on the Refuge (e.g., above treeline, the Skilak Loop area, the Canoe Systems), and all areas are off limits when there is inadequate snow cover. At the same time, there are large areas of the Refuge available for extended periods of time in most winters.

The access to Refuge portions of the Caribou Hills is a unique example of opportunity for snowmobile use. This is a Congressionally-designated Wilderness Area that if it occurred anywhere in the lower 48 states, it would be off limits to any kind of motorized use.

The opportunities and compromises that have evolved over several decades on the Kenai continue to serve us reasonably well and I don't see them changing too much in the future. The biggest threat that could potentially affect snowmobile use is the increased encroachment into closed areas we have noticed in recent years.

For the most part the snowmobile fraternity has proven to be a conscientious group. It is the few individuals that harass animals occasionally with their machines, or knowingly lay trails that others will follow into closed areas, or vandalize signs or facilities, that are always remembered.

I encourage folks to get the word out to others, and if you are not familiar with the Refuge snowmobile regulations, stop by the Refuge office before next season and pick up a copy. Keep your fingers crossed for a warm spring and for lots of snow by next December 1 for the next snowmobile opener!

Robin West is the Refuge Manager for [Kenai National](#)

Wildlife Refuge. Robin has worked for the Fish and Wildlife Service for 20 years in Alaska. He lives with his wife Shannon and three children in their home off Kalifornsky Beach Road.